1

I was born in Krasnostav, a Russian village bordering on Poland. The nearest railroad stations, Slavuta and Shepetovka, were forty kilometers away. It would take a whole day by horse-drawn wagon to reach them. In the year following the October Revolution, the population was about a thousand. Krasnostav was a small and poor shtetl. People spoke only in Yiddish and very few were able to read or to speak Russian. It had two synagogues, an elementary school, a shelter for beggars, and a newly-established government-run cooperative. There were no hospitals or other medical services in town. People would take a little vodka in order to deaden the pain of a toothache. By middle age, many people lost all their teeth. Most Jews tried to make a living by illegally trading dry goods with neighboring Ukrainian peasants. But they made only enough to meet daily needs, always living in fear of arrest by the local officials. A small percentage were employed as craftsmen and brickmakers. The rabbi was among the poorest of the town.

I remember winters with temperatures below zero. The ink on the school tables would freeze. Women would wash clothing through a hole in the ice. They would also shovel snow and pile it into big mounds. We had no electricity: we used kerosene lamps which illuminated the house very poorly. The houses were heated with wood and straw gathered during the summer. My parents' house was big and difficult to keep heated, so we suffered from the cold. In January and February there was so much snow that the whole town was practically buried in it. It took months for it all to melt and we would grow impatient.

But even though it was cold, the winter provided me with amusement. The Ukrainian peasants would travel over the snow in their sleighs to our town to trade their produce for sugar, salt, and yeast. They would go to the market square every Sunday and

several of them would then come to our house to warm up with tea from the hot samovar and pancakes with sour cream. They would also drink vodka from big glasses and the house would be filled with laughter. I would ask them for a ride and I would sit in the back of the sleigh and fly with them over the snow.

Another break in our hard life would come on Fridays as we prepared for Shabbos. The town took on a busy air. The women would scrape the mud and dirt off the wooden floors. The chullent was put in the oven. Girls walked with shiny hair combed into long braids. Toward evening the little boys went to shul with their fathers to greet the Shabbos.

After the long winter, the spring was very welcomed, even though the streets were muddy from the melting snow. The fresh air smelled sweet from the gardens and fields surrounding Krasnostav. Also, the aroma of black bread and mahorka (a cheap tobacco rolled in newspaper for use as a cigar) filled the air. On a sunny day the straw roofs of the houses gleamed like gold.

In the summer, city people of the Ukraine who wanted to escape the polluted air of the factories would come to our quiet town to spend their vacations.

At harvest time, I watched the peasants come home from working in the fields. They held sickles in their hands and their faces were dark from the strong sun.

The Ukrainian peasants and the Jewish people of Krasnostav were friendly. They not only traded with one another; they understood each others' customs and helped each other prepare for holidays. The Jewish tradesmen made sure to stock foods like herring and raisins for the Ukrainians. The Ukrainians assisted the Jews in cleaning their houses.

Who could have imagined how radically this peaceful coexistence was to change?

The Jews and Christians had been living side by side for centuries.

Donna with her parents, Chana and Avram.

2

I was an only child. My mother Chana had been unable to bear children for ten years after her marriage. The birth was a very difficult one. My mother labored with only a midwife in attendance. After many hours, her younger brother Daniel and a peasant friend crossed the border to Poland and brought back a doctor from Koretz. When I was born, my mother's sister Meita carried me to my mother's bed and said, "Chanzi, take a look at your baby. She is beautiful."

I had been the apple of my mother's eye. How she wanted to see me grown up and married! I was all of her dreams. My mother was a frail woman with few teeth. I am still haunted by her deep-set dark eyes set in a gaunt face. To supplement our meager existence, she traded with the Ukrainian peasants. I remember how she struggled with heavy sacks of flour and potatoes balanced on her narrow shoulders. She lived from one Sabbath to the next because that was the only day she could rest. But despite our poverty, I believe my mother found happiness in loving God and helping others.

My father Avram was a deeply religious man, devoting himself to prayer and study of the Torah. He had come from a small town, Annapole, twenty kilometers from Krasnostav. When he married my mother, her father Yisroel opened a dry goods store for him in front of his own house which faced onto the main street and my father used the dowry to stock the store with merchandise. However, after a few years he was forced to close the store by the Communist government which organized a cooperative instead. Then Father became a peddler, going from village to village trying to sell the gifts that he received from his relatives in the United States. He made a very poor living at it. But spiritually he, too, like my mother, was rich.

On Friday nights we would welcome the Sabbath at my grandparents' home. Seated around the table would be my mother's brothers Shelik, Daniel and Usher, and her sister Meita. Uncle Shelik was my favorite: whenever he saw me he would pretend he was a magician and produce a chunk of bread from under his jacket and give it to me. He knew that I was hungry most of the time. He was also well-liked by the townspeople who would often come to him for advice. Grandpa Yisroel sat at the head of the table and chanted the kiddush, then Grandma Sara served the meal. I would help her and sometimes I went for extra dishes into a storage room, where I saw three old Torahs covered with a white linen tablecloth. When the larger of Krasnostav's two synagogues had been closed, the young Komsomol leaders dumped these Torahs into the street. Grandma rescued them. Cradling them gently in her arms, she took them to their new home.

All the people seated at our table lived a life of poverty, but they drew strength from their religion. It was no sacrifice for Grandfather Yisroel to sit on a hard bench in a cold synagogue barely illuminated by a flickering kerosene lamp; poring over the intricacies of the Talmud was a joy. My family was happy in their love of God.

Summer was my favorite time of the year for it was then that I would visit my father's mother Malka in Annapole. I would ride there on a horse-drawn wagon, thinking about her freshly-baked mun cookies. I had several friends in Annapole. My best friend was a redhead named Chana Venetik who would play hide and seek with me among the tall trees of the park on the outskirts of the town. Before the revolution, the park had been part of a Polish count's estate. Nearby was a sugar factory. The manager of the factory had two daughters, Sonia and Svetlana, with whom I also played. They spoke Russian to me and I listened carefully to learn the language.

Malka Meister (Donna's grandmother from Annapole).

3

On reaching my eighth birthday I registered in the town elementary school. All of its seven classes were taught in Yiddish. We went to school every day except Sunday from nine to one, sitting on benches beneath portraits of Lenin and Stalin. We were taught arithmetic and the alphabet in the beginning classes. Weaker students were kept after school for special coaching. We obeyed our teachers.

Of course Yiddish was my mother tongue, and I had been brought up in the Jewish tradition, but the school was trying to pull me away from my religion and to indoctrinate me with communistic ideas. To counteract this, my parents sent me to a Hebrew teacher after school. I studied with him until 1930, when such teaching was forbidden by the local government. At first Pinchas covered his windows so that he could teach in secret, but he was discovered and had to sign an affidavit that he would no longer teach.

In the meantime, the principal of my school, an old party member, wanted the students to become involved in the anti-religion movement. We were organized in group actions whose aim was to impress on the townspeople that religion was the opium of the masses. On Yom Kippur eve the principal led students in front of the synagogue and directed them to play loud music to disrupt the services. I faked illness that evening and stayed in bed, so I would not be seen going to shul nor joining my classmates.

During Passover, students were coached to perform in plays on the falseness of religion.

A play we present to you
We try to cleanse the old world
from heaven to earth
And from religion the mildew.

Our teachers made sure that we had lots of work to do on Saturday, the Jewish day of rest, so that Shabbos became the worst day of the week for me. I wrote with a leaky pen and I could not easily wash the ink from my hands. When I came home from school, my grandfather would inspect my hand to see if it was stained.

The anti-religion movement went beyond school activities. Organizations like the Pioneers and the Komsomol also interfered with the performance of religious worship. I remember seeing Komsomol members burning Yiddish books by writers like Sholem Asch, Chaim Bialik, Abraham Reisen and Itzik Manger. Hundreds of synagogues were sequestered or destroyed by the Soviet authorities. In 1937, members of the clergy were arrested and shot as enemies of the people. Krasnostav was left with only one small synagogue. The Communist party encouraged people to burn their Jewish books. In the late 1930's, the Yiddish theater was closed. Before then, I had learned poems and stories written by Jewish writers like Bergelson, Markish, and Feffer, and I had written compositions about their life and work. Some of these writers were imprisoned for being Zionists and they were tortured in the KGB chambers.

To substitute for the Jewish religion, I was taught in school about proletariat holidays such as Woman's Day – March 8th, and the October Revolution – November 7th. On these days the school was decorated with flags and banners. Speeches were given with words such as, "Comrades, Workers, Peasants and Working Intelligentsia! We shall fight together against the parasites, exploiters, speculators, and fortune makers. We shall break our chains." I was once told to recite these words at a rally:

We red pioneers
We are children of October.
The sun's rays sends out light
For everyone the same.

Each speaker repeated the popular words: "We shall catch up and leap past the capitalist countries."

I was torn between loyalty to my parents and loyalty to my school and country. It was difficult for me as a young child to understand why my parents and my school teachers had such opposing beliefs.

4

At the age of ten I joined the Pioneers, a Communist children's organization similar to the Boy Scouts and Girl Scouts in the United States. I wore a pinafore with a white collar, and around my neck, a triangular red kerchief which was the insignia of the Pioneers. We greeted each other with "Be ready," to which we replied, "I am always ready." In our town we had a Pioneer Palace, a house which had been confiscated from Elic Kaplan. Here we were taught singing, dancing and politics. We took a solemn oath to love Lenin and to study hard. We were taught to respect the older generation, but also to teach them our way of life and to point out to them that religion was foolish.

The day before holidays, all the Pioneers helped to clean the windows in school and put up banners reading: "Long live the proletariat revolution," "Long live Comrade Stalin," "We will sharpen our swords until victory." We celebrated Women's Day with a poem:

Enough cooking, Mama
Enough worries.
Come out with us together—
It is a holiday, the eighth of March!

We were taught that women in the Soviet Union have equal rights with men in governmental, cultural, and political activities; equal rights with men to work, rest and leisure. The state gave aid to mothers of large families, maternity leave with pay, and provided nurseries and kindergartens.

To celebrate the October Revolution, the Pioneers would carry pictures of Marx, Engels, Lenin, and Stalin into the market place. One project that Pioneers undertook was to teach illiterate older people the importance of the theories of Marx and Lenin.

The first word that I learned to spell in school was Lenin; the second was Stalin. I remember saying that Stalin had one letter more than Lenin. On the anniversary of Lenin's death (he died January 21, 1924), we recited poems about him.

Our leader Lenin has passed away,
He lies in a mausoleum.
With red and black flags march children
One and two steps
Lenin, Lenin, nice name
Lenin Lenin, great leader
We owe to you that we will build Communism the world over.
You and I dear brother,
I with the hammer and you with the sickle.
Together we look forward
To a free new life forever.

5

At home, particularly in my grandmother's house, I would listen to stories about Jewish life before I was born. I would hear about the pogroms—how hundreds of Jewish homes had been destroyed in the cities, towns and villages, how stores and synagogues went up in flames. I also learned how my mother suffered a miscarriage when she had to jump over fences and run and hide from a band of marauders.

Among the Jews Czar Nicholas earned the title Haman II. In Czarist Russia, Jewish parents were afraid to send their children to government schools for fear that they would be converted to Catholicism. As a result, there was considerable illiteracy among the Jewish people. After the most violent pogrom in Kiev at the beginning of the century, many Jews from Krasnostav left the Ukraine for the United States. My father's younger brothers, Henry and George Meister, our cousin Abe Bain, and our neighbors, the Goldmans and the Kaplans—all resettled in America.

Some Jewish leaders expected a dramatic change with the coming of the Communist Revolution. They thought that the restrictions on the Jews placed by the Czar would be removed. All the hopes the Russian Jews placed in the revolution unfortunately failed to be realized.

6

In the 1920's, there had been a score of small Jewish shops in Krasnostav, all of them earning very little money. In the 1930's, a deputy from the town hall ordered the shops closed down and replaced by a large state cooperative. Unfortunately the co-operative had little merchandise. One night I stood on line from midnight until 7 A.M., and when I finally got to the door, nothing was left. A rumor spread that a town hall official had entered through a back door and taken all the merchandise.

In addition to closing their stores, the government heavily taxed former shopkeepers. Most of these people were now forced to work in a small factory where they made bricks out of cement. As a result of the demise of free enterprise, a shortage of everything developed. The business life in our town died. Consumers' needs were not satisfied, so people turned to the black market. They would trade items like sugar and salt for other commodities.

Up to this time, my father had been a small merchant, just managing to support us. Now that he lost his store, we became even poorer and my father tried to make money any way he could. A member of the Krasnostav town hall caught my father selling a few yards of dry goods. This was considered black marketeering; and the government had strict regulations against black marketeering, labeling it sabotage.

One cold winter night, two members of the NKVD banged at our door. When we let them in, they started rummaging through the house, searching for money they were told we had received from my American Uncle Henry. They found it in a bottle we had buried in the earth in our basement. My mother Chana lay sobbing on the floor as my father was dragged out of the house into a waiting black van. I kept repeating "Don't worry, Mama. It's a mistake. Daddy will be back."

In school the next day, my teacher Sara Moiseyevna announced that my father had been arrested as an enemy of the people. All my classmates turned to look at me, and I cried uncontrollably.

My father was kept in Shepetovka jail for almost three weeks, receiving only half a pound of black bread and a cup of beet soup daily which he refused to eat because it was not kosher. After his release, he was skinny as a skeleton, having lost thirteen pounds from his already frail body. No one recognized him.

He would not tell us about his experience: he had been warned not to disclose the conditions in prison, not to describe the whippings administered to the prisoners with belts until they lost consciousness. It remained my father's secret. Only the black and blue marks on his body and his swollen legs bore witness.

The NKVD came to us a second time to look for money. As they were searching in the bedroom, my mother ran to me in the kitchen and gave me an American five dollar bill folded into tenths. She whispered to me to throw it out the window. I did and we were saved from the NKVD's wrath.

My family realized that it was not safe to retain ties with our family in the United States.

7

From 1937–1940 I was a student in Zhitomir Pedagogical Institute. Our classrooms were brightly lit and our laboratories were fully equipped. We had a library of thousands of books—none, on religious themes or other forbidden subjects. Written in big letters on the library blackboard was the statement: "RELIGION IS POISONING OUR ATMOSPHERE." The staff of teachers were well trained for their job.

I lived in a dormitory, sharing a room with five other girls. There were also housekeeping rooms for married couples. The bathrooms were outdoors. We did our work in the study halls of the dormitories. On the campus there was a *gastronom* selling food snacks. We ate once a day in a cafeteria. The main meal consisted of a borsht, called *pervoe*, and a little slice of meat, usually rabbit, with kasha, called *vtoroye*. The meat tasted like chicken. I would often sit in class with an empty stomach because I did not receive enough food. However I knew that my future depended on my education, that through learning I would occupy a place of honor in the society.

Tuition was free. I received a stipend according to my academic standing. Once a week I was given a coupon to a public bath house—there were no bathing facilities in the dormitory.

I majored in languages, studying Ukrainian, Russian and German. I received my best grades in The Development of Twentieth Century Russian. I also studied the pedagogical theory of Jean-Jacques Rousseau. More than half of the history course was about the capitalistic, bourgeois, imperialist aggressors like the Americans. I was taught that in the United States Negroes and whites live in hostility. We learned about the depression—how millions of people were out of work. "The capitalistic society will fall." "We have to break our own chains to fight against the parasites, speculators, and fortune makers."

Disagreements arose in families between children and their parents over politics, the youth having been exposed to so much government propaganda in school. I myself came to believe that community was the basic unity, that individualism was evil, that owning private property was wrong. In my grandparents' house, my family would speak in whispers when I entered, knowing that I would not be happy with their political discussions. I was a Soviet patriot. I believed that the state was educating me, that my parents did not have the benefit of higher education, so they might be misinformed. In fact, in school we were encouraged to try to change our parents' beliefs. But I felt uncomfortable disagreeing with my parents. And so I spent my youth uncertain about who was right and who was wrong.

We would in addition regularly receive lectures from Communist party members on patriotic themes such as world proletarian literature. Every other week we had the opportunity of hearing a classical music concert. It was mandatory that we attend movies about the achievements of new factories and mines, The films showed only the best of Russia, movies dealing with cheerful topics like the Pioneers and ballet. Bad things such as floods or disasters were not shown.

Once a week I went shopping for personal items, spending a large part of the day standing on line. In Zhitomir there was a big department store, Government Universal Magasin (GUM). It did not offer a large variety of items and the prices were high in comparison with my stipend. Once while walking past the store window after school, I noticed blue polo shirts with white collars and cuffs selling for three rubles each. My parents had told me that if I saw cheap clothing for sale, I should buy several items and send them to Krasnostav. My parents would then resell them at a profit. In this way they would better be able to support me in school. I went in and bought ten of them. I explained to the salesclerk that I was a Pioneer leader and needed them for my group. I took them to my room and hid them under my bed. Unfortunately the cleaning woman saw them and informed the director of my school. He summoned me to his office and almost discharged me from the school, accusing me of "pure speculation."

In December, 1938, I voted in my first election. Classes were cancelled on that day. In the column listing the candidates for party leader, I found only one name: Stalin. Of course this did not surprise me. I had read and studied much about "Stalin, our father," and "Stalin, the genius." Under portraits of Stalin hanging in the voting hall was written in large letters, "We receive the sun from Stalin."

Also in late December, I had to go to the passport office registry for a passport. This was a document which every Soviet citizen had to carry. Up to this time I was included on my father's passport. The passport specified a person's nationality and occupation. I had a choice. I could have indicated that my nationality was either Russian or Jewish. I chose Jewish. I did not know that in a few years this choice could mean the difference between life and death.

From January 1st until January 13th we had a recess. I would go home to Krasnostav. It took three days to travel the two hundred miles. I remember sitting on my suitcase for a whole night in sub-zero weather, waiting for the train whose schedule was erratic. To warm up, we would bounce up and down, hitting one foot against the other.

Donna as a student at the Pedagogical Institute in Zhitomir, 1938.

8

Komsomol was a youth group organized in committees in factories, collective farms, and schools. It was a step beyond the Pioneers towards membership in the Communist party. Weekly meetings were held where songs were sung describing love for the motherland, Russia, and Lenin and Stalin.

Who fills in for the Communists?
The Komsomol, comrade, Komsomol.
Who fills in for the Komsomol?
Pioneers, comrade, pioneers.
Who fills in for the pioneers?
October children, comrade, October children.

In my heart, I yearned to become a member of the *Komsomol*. My political interest played some part in my desire, but primarily I hoped that being accepted in *Komsomol*, I would get a better job as a teacher. After leaving the Zhitomir Pedagogical Institute, I taught in the village of Huta. I applied for membership and was examined first by a local group in my school. They asked me questions such as: "Do you believe in God?" Naturally my reply was no. "Which newspapers do you read?" My answer was *Pravda*, which at the time had the largest circulation in the world. *Pravda*, the organ of the Communist party, frequently quoted statements of Lenin such as, "Freedom cannot be purchased, we have to pay for it with our blood." The slogan of the paper was, "Proletarians of all countries, close ranks and march together!" I dutifully repeated all this to my examiners.

I was approved by this committee, and now had to be accepted by the regional committee in Beresdov, about eight kilometers from Krasnostav. On a Wednesday afternoon at one o'clock, I rode to Beresdov on a horse-drawn wagon used by the post office to get

the mail. Two witnesses, teachers from my school, came along to swear that I was loyal to the motherland. On the way, the sky clouded over, it began to thunder and a warm spring rain soaked me through and through. I arrived and entered a small room where about thirty people were waiting for the happy moment when they would be accepted into the *Komsomol*. Finally my turn came. The president called me to the table. Nicholay Andreivitsch asked me to recite my biography. I told it to him in a nervous voice. When I finished, the committee members asked me questions.

"Did you belong to the Pioneers when you were younger?" I said yes. "What is your education?" I told them that in 1939 I had completed the Zhitomir Pedagogical Institute and that I was presently employed in a school.

"Tell us facts about Russian history." I talked about the October Revolution, the leadership of Lenin, the storming of the Winter Palace, the cruiser *Aurora*. I quoted Marx to them: "We all shall produce according to our abilities and be paid according only to our needs." I repeated Lenin's declaration that all nations in the Soviet Union were equal.

"Which writers and composers are you familiar with?" "Gogol, Chekhov," I answered, "Tolstoy, Matakovsky, Gorki. I listen to music by Prokofiev and Scriabin."

So far my interview was progressing smoothly. But then I was asked: "Do you have friends or relatives in the capitalist countries?" "Yes," I answered, "my father has two brothers in New York City in America." Nicholay Andreivitsch's face became red and he gritted his teeth as he asked me if I corresponded with my uncles. I said that I did not know them and that I never wrote to them.

The taint of capitalism was on me. I had communication with the bourgeois enemy abroad. Ivan Vasilevitsch asked me a question: "Isn't the coat you are wearing made of American wool—wool of your enemies?" "Yes," I answered, "but it was not sent personally to me." I repeated that I did not communicate with my relatives. I tried to make clear to them that my parents had nothing in common with Jews in other lands. I myself did not regard Jews in capitalistic societies as fellow Jews.

This was one of the darkest hours in my life. The committee obviously knew everything about me because all letters sent abroad and received from there were read by the authorities.

I was asked to leave the room. After what seemed an eternity, but was probably only fifteen minutes, I was called back in. I was

told that I was not to be admitted to *Komsomol* because of my non-proletarian background. The secretary gave a speech. "*Komsomol* members," he said, "the Communist leaders of tomorrow must set an example of morality and discipline. The Young Communist League must be opposed to domestic and foreign enemies. *Komsomol* enrolls only children from the working masses and children who have no relationships with the capitalistic bourgeoisie." When he finished his speech, I dropped into a chair, stunned. On my way home, I wished that the horse and wagon would overturn and that I'd be run over. My dreams had been shattered.

As a young girl I had been patriotic. For eighteen years I had devoted my life to my socialist homeland and had rallied around the theories of Lenin and the Party. My feelings changed a great deal as a result of not being admitted into *Komsomol*.

When I returned to Huta, some teachers in my school teased me. I lost authority in my class.

In the summer of 1940, I went with another teacher to Kiev, the capital of the Ukraine, to ask permission to be transferred to a school in a large city. I was refused, whereas the other teacher, a *Komsomol* member, was granted her wish. I remained in Huta, very unhappy.

9

In March, 1939, when Hitler invaded Czechoslovakia, it became evident to all the people of Russia that their hope for a permanent peace had evaporated. The Nazis had broken their pledge. In September, 1939, the Germans invaded Poland, meeting little resistance. The German Wehrmacht ripped Poland to pieces in six days. Since Krasnostav was a short distance from the Polish border, we were frightened when we heard of the Polish surrender to Germany.

I had studied in teachers college about the Nazi-Soviet non-aggression pact signed by Ribbentrop and Stalin on August 23, 1939. Germany assured our country of peace, which lasted for a year and a half. Russians wondered if the pact with Hitler was worthwhile. We did not know why Soviet Foreign Commissar Litvinov, a Jew, was replaced by Molotov. All diplomacy was done secretly. Only later did we learn of the agreement between Russia and Germany to divide Poland. On September 17, 1939, the Soviet Army joined the German Wehrmacht in Poland. Schulenberg, the German ambassador in Moscow, suggested that the Russian Army take over the eastern part of Poland, an area about 77,000 square miles. But the Russian people did not want to fight to take Poland. Stalin had to invent a reason to convince everyone that it was necessary: he told us that the Red Army had to march into Poland to aid the Ukrainian and White Russian brothers there. The Red Army made swift territorial gains, and seized Western Byelorussia and Western Ukraine.

We in Krasnostav were at the time isolated from everybody and did not know the situation of Jews elsewhere. Our family prayed that war could be avoided. We knew from the past the suffering that war could bring, but we were not well informed about the German barbarities against Jews. As a student, I had seen a film called *Professor Mamlock*. The man of the title had been assis-

tant director of the Imperial and Royal Academy of Music in Berlin. In the film it was shown how he was removed one day from his office by the Gestapo and made to wear a large yellow armband with the word "Jude" written on it. The movie ended at this point. We did not have other specific information about German treatment of Jews.

The Jews of Krasnostav began to feel that they should evacuate before Hitler's armies reached us, but we did not recognize the urgency of the situtation.